

Selecting a mode of practice: Military optometry

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Part VI of Series

The Practice Strategies "Selecting a mode of practice" series is intended to help new practitioners become familiar with the various modes of practice from which optometrists today can choose. Past articles have looked at private prac-

Military optometrists provide full-scope optometric care in a highly integrated multidisciplinary environment. The military's Health Professions Scholarship Program, a highly regarded benefit and retirement package, and a host of professional development and training opportunities—many unique to the military—are attractive features of military practice. In addition, military practice also offers a host of intangible benefits, including camaraderie and patriotic pride.

tice, corporate-affiliated practice, the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, community health centers, and the Veterans Health Administration. Future articles will cover multidisciplinary clinics and other practice options.

Service in the United States military as an optometrist can be a tremendously rewarding professional career. It is also widely recognized to provide remarkable scholarship opportunities and wide-ranging initial profes-

sional experience. Optometrists in the Army, Navy, and Air Force provide full scope-of-practice eye and vision care as respected members of a highly integrated, multidisciplinary, world-class health care team (see Figures 1 and 2). They are able to concentrate on patient care, free from most of the management hassles associated with practice in the private sector. Facilities (all equipped with new electronic health records systems) and office staff are comparable with most in the private sector (see Figure 3). Compensation is comparable with that offered in the private sector when all factors are considered. Retirement and benefit programs are widely regarded as among the best available. A highly attractive scholarship program can substantially offset the cost of professional education. Moreover, military service can offer the optometrist a striking array of professional advancement (see Figure 4) and specialized training opportunities—related to both optometric practice and the general development of leadership or management skills—many of which are unique to the military. It also offers a host of intangible benefits, including camaraderie, patriotic pride in supporting the military personnel who defend the nation, and the respect that comes with being a commissioned officer in the United States military.

Military optometrists—whether serving in the Army, Navy, or Air Force—must be licensed in one of the 50 states, Washington, D.C., the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Guam. Practitioners in all 3 branches of service provide care as part of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) Military Health System and under the military's interservice TRICARE health insurance program. (Health care services for the U.S. Marine Corps are provided by the Navy.) Military optometrists provide care primarily in multidisciplinary clinics—where they often represent the only source of eye care—or in hospitals. However, they may be deployed overseas to provide eye care for service members in a combat zone. They may also be deployed to provide eye care to underserved civilian populations around the globe as part of humanitarian assistance missions (see Figures 5 and 6).

In general, ophthalmic equipment in military optometric practices is state-of-the-art. For example, most military optometric facilities now offer optical coherence tomography. As part of ongoing programs to ensure the equipment in medical facilities is up to date, practitioners may request the addition of new types of equipment on an annual basis.

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Similarly, existing equipment is replaced routinely, under capital expense programs, as it ages past its life expectancy, becomes obsolete, or becomes overly expensive to maintain.

Patient load in military optometric practices is usually commensurate with other modes of practice, generally 16 to 18 patients a day (although exact patient loads will vary from facility to facility and workload targets vary a bit among the 3 branches of service). A typical day might consist of 14 to 15 comprehensive eye examinations as well as a couple of walk-ins or a few follow-up examinations. Workload requirements for military health care providers are actually set in terms of relative value units (RVUs) under programs like the Army's Performance Based Adjustment Model, which requires optometrists to provide an average of 19 to 20 RVUs of care per day, a goal just about any optometrist who is gainfully employed in a practice should be able to meet, even given the necessity to be away from the practice on occasion because of training or deployment. All military optometrists are required to carefully document the care they provide in their patient's electronic health record. Military health care facilities provide guidelines for the hours of operation for their optometrists. Practitioners are free to set hours within those guidelines; however, they will not have quite the same freedom to set the hours or days during which patients are seen.

There are a number of factors that set military practice apart from civilian practice: the potential for deployment, relatively frequent relocation (every 3 to 4 years), the need to maintain a high level of personal physical fitness, and unique areas of professional emphasis. It is indicative of the culture of military optometry that although some of those factors might be considered disadvantages by civilian practitioners, many military optometrists tend to view them as advantages.

It should be noted that military optometrists have driven much of the advancement in the optometric scope of practice over the last several decades. Optometrists in Vietnam performed procedures ranging from refraction to the treatment of eye injuries and disease. Optometrists serving with the combat units performed even more advanced treatment procedures. Many of these same optometrists returned to their civilian practices after the war determined to change state laws to broaden their scopes of practice. Others were strong advocates of reform in the optometry college curriculum and worked to change related state laws. All of this helped spur the movement for allowing the use of diagnostic and therapeutic pharmaceuticals by optometrists. Today's military optometrists follow in that tradition by providing an extremely wide spectrum of eye and vision care to a highly diverse range of patients.

Advantages of military optometry

Absolute full scope of practice, from pediatrics to geriatrics

Providing care for active duty military personnel is, of course, the military optometrist's primary concern. How-

ever, military ODs also provide care for the dependents of military personnel as well as military retirees and their dependants. (Many military retirees are "dual eligible" to receive care at either Veterans Administration Medical Centers or at military medical treatment facilities.) Care commonly is provided for the young children (often ages 1 through 4) of military families. As a result, the military optometrist may be called on, in the course of a career, to provide a complete scope of services from cosmetic contact lenses to low vision rehabilitative care to the treatment of virtually every eye disease or disorder.

The scope of a military optometrist's practice is based primarily on the scope of practice in the state in which the optometrist is licensed. As in most institutional health care settings, the optometrist must be credentialed when providing care in a military health facility. However, the credentialing process is not intended to be arbitrarily limiting. Congress (in addition to the Surgeons General of the Army, Navy, and Air Force) has made it perfectly clear that military personnel are best served when health care practitioners, including optometrists, practice to the full scope of care they are licensed to provide. For that reason, military optometrists are authorized to diagnose and treat the full range of eye conditions even when ophthalmologists are stationed in the same facility. In all 3 branches of the military, optometry and ophthalmology are considered separate medical services, and the optometrist is authorized, and expected, to act as an independent provider of care.

Integrated, multidisciplinary health care team

All military health facilities provide an integrated, multidisciplinary care environment. Military optometrists regularly refer patients to, as well as receive referrals from, general practice medical doctors and other health care providers. They are credentialed to prescribe ophthalmic medications available through on-site pharmacies or TRICARE-affiliated pharmacies in the civilian community. They can order any laboratory test available through a medical laboratory, including radiology examinations. Facilitating the multidisciplinary environment is the military system of electronic health records. The DoD's custom-developed AHLTA health record provides complete health information on all patients, including all test results and medical images. This electronic health record provides the patient's exact history of care as well as information on any injuries or systemic conditions that might affect the patient's eyes. It also allows an optometrist to efficiently report when the eye examination reveals a systemic condition that necessitates an appropriate referral.

Reimbursement and benefits package

Pay schedules and benefit packages are uniform across the 3 branches of service. All licensed optometrists enter the military as commissioned officers at the O-3 grade (meaning the rank of captain in the Army and Air Force and the rank of lieutenant in the Navy). Starting salaries for

military optometrists—currently \$54,000 annually—are widely understood to be below income levels for those entering civilian practice. However, with raises and promotions, military optometrists over time can easily attain income levels commensurate with private practitioners—in many cases well into the six-figure range. A significant portion of that salary is subject to preferential tax treatment. Board certification (for optometry, Fellowship in the American Academy of Optometry) brings an annual increase in pay. Benefit packages offered by the military are widely regarded to be among the best available. Military optometrists can retire after 20 years of service, at 50% of their base salary at retirement, with an additional 2.5% of salary added for each year of service thereafter, to a total of 75% of base pay. (For example, after 30 years of service, a practitioner would retire at 75% of base pay.) In addition, optometrists have the opportunity to invest a portion of their income in the federal government's Thrift Savings Plan, which is a "nonmatched" tax-deferred retirement program much like a civilian 401(k) plan. Thirty days of paid vacation are provided each year, beginning with the first year of service. Military optometrists and their families also have access to a world-class health care system, a benefit they maintain in retirement. Military optometrists also receive "tax-free" housing allowances and have unlimited privileges at exchanges (military department stores), commissaries (military grocery stores), officer's clubs, gymnasiums, and even facilities such as do-it-yourself auto repair shops.

Professional advancement and education opportunities

Before entry into military service, optometry students may take advantage of the Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP). The HPSP is offered in 4-year, 3-year, and 2-year scholarships that pay for all professional education expenses including tuition, fees, books, and equipment. The HPSP also provides the student with a monthly stipend in excess of \$1,200. In return, the graduating optometry student becomes a commissioned officer in the United States military and spends the next several years on active duty with the military service that sponsored their scholarship. All commissioned officers in the military are required to serve a minimum of 8 years. However, only part of that time is on active duty, the remainder is spent with the Reserves. The officer's initial Active Duty Service Obligation is based on the number of years of education the student receives under the scholarship, with a 3-year minimum (4-year scholarship = 4 years of active duty, 3-year scholarship = 3 years of active duty, and a 2-year scholarship = 3 years of active duty). After completing his or her active duty time, the optometrist is then assigned to the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) for the remainder of his or her 8-year commitment. Optometrists within the IRR do not train with any military unit, but they may be subject to a presidential recall to active duty during a national emergency.

For those optometrists who have entered active duty, the Army, Navy, and Air Force each offer a variety of programs for advanced education including residency programs,

MBA programs in fields such as health care management, and Ph.D. programs in physiologic optics. To take advantage of these educational opportunities, the officer applies for acceptance into the Long Term Health Education Training (LTHET) program. This program places the officer within a military-sponsored or private-sector university for 1 to 3 years and pays for all educational expenses including tuition, fees, books, and equipment. During this period, the officer remains on active duty drawing full salary and benefits.

Apart from the LTHET program, the military services generally fund travel and conference fees for optometric continuing education required for the individual optometrist to maintain his or her state licensure. Board certification (for optometry, Fellowship in the American Academy of Optometry) is highly encouraged.

All 3 branches of the military also require additional professional development aimed at developing individual leadership skills. Initial military training is centered on the essentials of being an optometry officer. Later in his or her career, an officer may attend more advanced courses in leadership and military operations. Highly specialized training related to optometric practice—such as the Air Force's "Night Eye" (which involves night vision) and "Top Eye" (which involves training in an F-16 fighter jet) programs or Navy programs in aerospace optometry or the use of contact lenses on submarines—are also available. Additional training related to health care practice (such as advanced life support) or military skills (such as parachute jumping) are also available.

Pride and camaraderie

Military optometry offers a variety of intangible benefits, which, although difficult to quantify, practitioners will almost always consider to be among the most important. Optometrists in the Army, Navy, and Air Force take great pride in being a part of the American military and contributing to the defense of the nation. They enjoy being among, and caring for, military personnel. They enjoy the military lifestyle. They take special pride in upholding what is known, depending on the branch of service, as the Army Values, the Navy Standard, or the Air Force Core Values. Specifically, they strive to uphold a military medical standard of excellence and, therefore, directly contribute to the military readiness of the nation.

Disadvantages of military optometry

Deployment

Military optometrists may be called upon to deploy to combat zones such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Kosovo. There they will provide emergency eye care for wounded combatants and civilians as well as provide routine and comprehensive eye care for all assigned personnel. Military eyewear is prescribed and fabricated on the spot, on location, anywhere around the globe. Army practitioners are the mostly likely to be deployed to a combat zone; however,



Figure 1 Military optometrists provide care for active duty military personnel and their dependants as well as military retirees and their dependants.

optometrists in the Air Force and Navy can be called for such duty. (It should be noted that military optometrists are heavily protected while deployed and are unlikely to engage in battle or be in the line of fire.) Optometrists in all 3 branches of service may also be deployed as part of humanitarian assistance missions. In either case, deployment can



Figure 2 Military optometrists provide a full scope of care from pediatrics to low vision rehabilitation care.

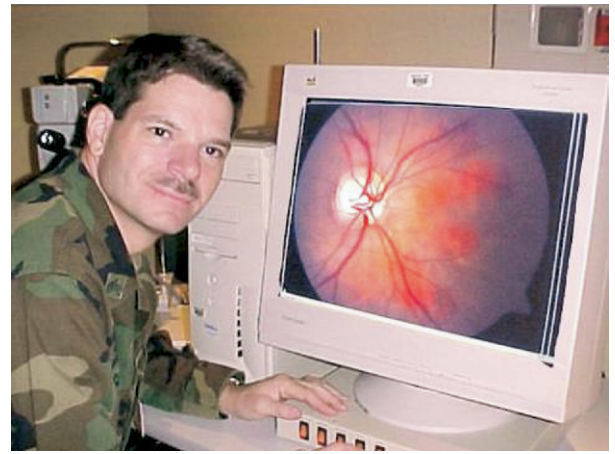


Figure 3 Military optometrists utilize state-of-the-art equipment including the custom-developed AHLTA health records system, which provides complete patient information including all test results and medical images.

mean being away from home and family for an extended period. However, military optometrists also tend to take pride in deployment and see it as a fulfilling part of military service. (It should be noted that, other than on its 2 humanitarian hospital ships, the Navy does not have optometric clinics onboard vessels. Navy optometrists may provide care onboard ships for relatively brief periods, but most Navy optometric care is provided on shore.)

Relocations

The Army, Navy, and Air Force all make it a practice to reassign personnel every 3 to 4 years. Those reassignments now come less frequently than in the past (when personnel was reassigned every 2 to 3 years). A typical military career will generally involve 2 assignments overseas. Military optometrists tend to view relocation as an exciting opportunity to experience new challenges in a new practice environment. They often see it as an opportunity to meet new friends and see other areas of the world. Although relocating a family overseas has its challenges, there are many families who find an overseas assignment to Europe or to the Pacific the adventure and travel opportunity of a lifetime.

Staff retention

Military optometric office staff, like military practitioners, tend to be reassigned every 3 to 4 years. They are also somewhat more likely than practitioners to be deployed. That can be disruptive to practice operations. However, staff positions in many practices are now being filled by civilian personnel (a trend in all 3 services). Not having direct authority over their staff's pay, some military practitioners feel they may not always be able to exert the same control over their office staffs as civilian practitioners.

Military readiness

Military optometrists are not regularly required to march and drill. However, they must, like other military officers,

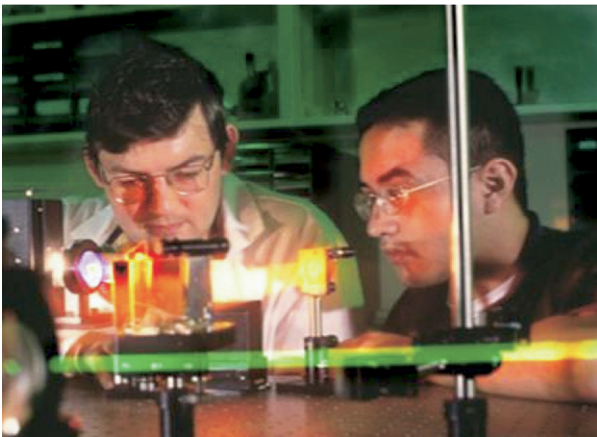


Figure 4 Military optometrists may have the opportunity to take part in research programs.

undergo basic officer military training. Like other officers, they are required to maintain a level of physical readiness appropriate to military service and are provided time in the course of their workweeks to do so. They may also be required to undergo other health care training (for example, basic life support training and certification in cardiopulmonary resuscitation are required). Most military ODs see this as another asset to a military career. However, practitioners who, for example, may not wish to pursue an ongoing program of physical fitness, may conclude that a military career may not be for them.

When considering military optometry

The military optometrist is a military officer first and a specialist who provides health care second. As an officer, it is the military optometrist's primary responsibility to serve, when called on, in the defense of the nation and to maintain the level of mental and physical readiness required to do so. The military optometrist may be deployed away from home and family for extended periods. The practitioner will be reassigned periodically. Continuing personal and professional growth is not just an opportunity afforded the optometrist in the military, it is effectively a requirement. The optometrist competes against a variety of highly qualified health care professionals within the military health care system for promotion based on accomplishments, participa-

tion in training programs, leadership, and overall performance. Although military optometrists may not have to develop and manage a practice in the same manner as civilian optometrists, they do have to oversee their staff. In line with military cost efficiency programs, they are required to carefully document all of the care they provide. They will not leave the rigors of coding and billing behind in the civilian world.

Army, Navy, and Air Force optometry all have distinct cultures. Individuals considering military optometry may wish to review their unique missions to determine which best coincides with their individual professional interests.

- Army optometrists provide comprehensive eye care to all active duty soldiers and their families and to military retirees and their dependents. They are most directly concerned with a soldier's "individual medical readiness" and with providing medical eye care for combat units with "boots on the ground." Of the 3 services, Army optometrists are the most likely to be deployed to a combat zone. They take pride in being near the heart of the action in the event of a military conflict. Army optometrists routinely participate in humanitarian assistance missions.
- Navy optometrists are most directly concerned with meeting the vision needs of the Navy and Marine Corps personnel and their families. The majority of



Figure 5 The USNS MERCY.



Figure 6 Navy Lieutenant Robert Senko, O.D., provides care during a recent humanitarian mission with the USNS MERCY.

this care is provided at shore-based Navy and Marine Corps facilities, many of which are in desirable coastal communities. However, they may be deployed for military or humanitarian assistance missions. Optometrists are stationed on the Navy's 2 humanitarian hospital ships. Navy optometrists may be called on to provide specialized care for the aerospace program, Navy and Marine Corps aviators, or submarine crews. The Navy also sponsors a number of optometric research programs.

- Air Force optometrists provide the expertise to manage the demanding visual needs of aviation personnel assigned to bases in the United States and in the European and Pacific areas of operations. Air Force optometry participates in a number of research programs in physiologic optics, laser eye protection, and night vision devices. Air Force optometrists may also be deployed for military or humanitarian assistance missions.

Those thinking about entering optometry should carefully investigate programs offered by the military as early as possible, for a variety of reasons. As previously noted, of great potential advantage is the HPSP under which the federal government will pay for professional education in return for a commitment of 8 years of service in either active duty or reserve service. However, it should be emphasized that the HPSP is a scholarship program into which students must enter before enrolling in, or at least completing, a doctoral education program. For example, the government will cover the cost of a 4-year optometry school education in return for a commitment of 4 years of active duty followed by 4 years of duty in the reserves. The cost

of 2 or 3 years of school will be covered in return for a 3-year commitment to active duty and 5 years of reserve duty. The scholarship covers tuition, as well as all books and related expenses, plus a monthly stipend. Those entering or those in optometry school, who may be interested in military optometry, should check with school counselors and recruiting officers for detailed and up-to-date information.

Military optometry may not be for the optometrist who dreams of establishing a practice and setting down roots in a community. However, for the optometrist who finds the military life to hold a host of intriguing challenges and a vast array of opportunities, a career in the Army, Navy, or Air Force may be perfect. Beyond the reimbursement and benefit packages, military service offers the optometrist the opportunity to provide a wide array of eye and vision care services in a range of settings. Few other career paths will offer so much potential for professional and personal growth. Fewer still will offer the practitioner the opportunity to live in a variety of locations around the world. For the optometrist who enjoys the camaraderie of military service, takes special pride in serving military personnel, and, above all, wishes to be part of something larger than one's self, practice in the Army, Navy, or Air Force can be difficult to beat.

Additional information on military optometry can be found online at:

- <http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/doem/vision/Army/join.asp>
- <http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/doem/vision/Navy/recruiting.asp>
- <https://kx.afms.mil/optometry>.